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ABSTRACT

The year-round calendar is an increasingly popular alternative to the traditional 9-month school calendar. This digest examines the benefits and challenges of teaching in year-round schools. Year-round schools may be on a single-track or multi-track schedule. Single-track schedules call for an instructional year of 180 days with short breaks interspersed throughout. Multi-track schedules stagger the instructional and vacation/intercession periods of each track throughout the entire year, so some students are receiving instruction while others are on vacation. Perceived benefits for teachers include: improved pay or work schedules; facilitation of educational improvements; and enhancement of the climate of professionalism. Perceived challenges for teachers include: organizational issues (e.g., sharing classrooms and leadership of extracurricular activities with other teachers); continuing education (finding time to schedule professional development); and conflicts in personal scheduling (e.g., teachers' children attending school on different calendars than their parents). Typically, the more teachers are exposed to year-round education, the more they like it, but the process of changing to such a schedule can create stress for them until they have time to adapt. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

Teaching in Year-Round Schools

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Teaching in Year-Round Schools

The year-round calendar is an increasingly popular alternative to the traditional nine-month school calendar. According to the National Association for Year-Round Education, in 1999 over 2 million students were enrolled in more than 2,900 U.S. year-round schools in 43 states, a five-fold increase in the last decade. This digest examines the benefits and challenges of teaching in year-round schools.

Single-Track vs. Multi-Track Schedules

Year-round education (YRE) is a concept which reorganizes the school year to provide more continuous learning by spacing the long summer vacation into shorter, more frequent vacations throughout the year (Johnson, 2000). Year-round schools may be on a single-track or multi-track schedule. A single-track schedule generally calls for an instructional year of 180 days, with short breaks (or intersessions) interspersed throughout the school year. A multi-track schedule staggers the instructional and vacation/ intersession periods of each track throughout the entire year, so that some students are receiving instruction while others are on vacation.

For example, in a single-track 45/15 design, the year is divided into four nine-week terms separated by three-week vacations or intersessions. All students and teachers attend school for nine weeks (45 days), then are on a three-week vacation (15 days). This sequence is repeated four times each year. Alternatively, in a multi-track 45/15 design, students are normally divided into four groups. During a 1½ week period, all students receive nine weeks of instruction and three weeks of vacation, but only three of the four groups are in school at one time, while the fourth group is on vacation. When the vacation group returns, another group leaves for a three-week vacation.

Thus, in the multi-track configuration, the enrollment in existing schools can be increased by one-third, or, alternatively, current class size can be reduced (Minnesota, 1999). Moreover, money which would otherwise have been spent on construction of new schools may be utilized to pay additional salary to teachers who elect to extend their contract on the multi-track year-round schedule. Therefore, the annual income of these teachers can conceivably be increased by one-third, and the effective supply of teachers can be increased by one-third (Liebman, 1959). Although each schedule has unique benefits and challenges for the teaching staff, neither

schedule implies that the teacher will be working the entire year.

Perceived Benefits for Teachers

Improved pay or work schedule. Both single-track and multi-track year-round schedules can potentially meet the interests of teachers who want extra days and extra pay and, alternatively, those who wish to keep their vacation days intact (Stenvall, 2000). In single-track schedules, teachers may choose to teach intersession classes for additional pay. In multi-track schedules, however, teachers can increase their earnings in several ways: through extended contracts, intersession employment, and substituting (Glines, 2000).

In multi-track scheduling some teachers may elect to work 12-month contracts for up to a third more contract days and earn considerably more salary. Some specialty teachers and those who do extracurricular activities teach across the tracks (Shields & Oberg, 2000). These "rainbow" teachers are in school more days and are paid accordingly. Or, during intersessions in which they are not teaching, teachers have the opportunity to substitute on other tracks within the same school or at other schools in the district, and at various grade levels (Minnesota, 1999; Brekke, 1992; Ballinger, Kirschenbaum, & Poinbeauf, 1987).

Teachers who are regularly employed by the district and also serve as substitutes are usually paid at a higher rate than non-staff substitutes. Additionally, teachers who participate in professional development opportunities during the vacation/ intersession periods are normally appropriately compensated (Brekke, 1992).

Alternatively, the year-round calendar can offer teachers the opportunity to work less than a standard nine-month calendar. For teachers who prefer more personal time to more money, it is possible for two teachers to split one year-round contract. Or, as evidenced in a new school schedule at Englehard Elementary School in Louisville, Ky., the week may be shortened to four required days (Rasmussen, 2000).

Facilitating educational improvements.

Teachers in year-round programs generally believe that the quality of instruction is better than in traditional programs due to the continuity of instruction (Quinlan, George, & Emmett, 1987). Teachers also believe that the YRE schedule has a positive impact on the way in which they think about and plan for instruction (Shields & Oberg, 2000). The organization of the instructional time allows them to be

reflective practitioners because they are able to plan at regular intervals during the academic year when it is needed the most (Shields & Oberg, 2000). They find it more efficient and productive to plan curriculum for shorter blocks of time and feel that the year-round calendar provides ample time segments for instruction.

In schools offering intersession programs during the vacation periods, teachers credit the intersession with enhancing and supplementing the regular curriculum (Quinlan, George, & Emmett, 1987). In addition, intersession courses provide opportunities for teacher experimentation with different curriculum and grade levels (Zykowski et al., 1991).

Another advantage for teachers is that less review time is necessary at the beginning of each instructional block, as research has demonstrated that the shorter vacation periods reduce summer learning loss (Cooper, et al., 1996). Researchers claim that this is especially true for the low socio-economic status (SES) level and high-risk students (Kneese & Knight, 1995; Gandara & Fish, 1994; Quinlan, George, & Emmett, 1987). This may be due to accessibility of immediate remediation in YRE (Curry, Washington, & Zyskowski, 1997).

As noted above, teachers in year-round calendars may choose to work as substitute teachers during their breaks. When regular teaching staff who are familiar with the school and the curriculum serve as substitutes, the quality, momentum, and continuity of instruction can be maintained at a higher level than with non-staff substitutes (Brekke, 1992).

Enhancing the climate of professionalism.

Of the studies in which teacher attitudes have been explicitly examined, the research results clearly indicate that the majority of teachers in year-round schools favor the year-round calendar and believe it substantially enhances the professional environment (Worthen & Zsiray, 1994; Shields & Oberg, 2000).

The year-round calendar can enhance teacher professionalism in several ways. The opportunity for extended contracts and higher pay can reduce the need for teachers to moonlight in other jobs to earn extra money (Worthen & Zsiray, 1994). Due to the frequency of breaks on the year-round calendar, teachers exhibit improved morale and motivation, and less burnout and stress (North Carolina Insight, 1997; Minnesota, 1999; Quinlan, George, & Emmett, 1987).

To date, there have been no studies finding a greater percentage of teacher absenteeism on YRE schedules (Worthen

& Zsiray, 1994; Grotjohn & Banks, 1993). In fact, it was reported that teachers were absent considerably less on YRE schedules (Brekke, 1984), and research by Quinlan, George, & Emmett (1987) substantiated the findings that YRE decreased teacher absences considerably (Worthen & Zsiray, 1994).

Perceived Challenges for Teachers

In addition to the many perceived benefits of YRE, research also indicates there are some perceived challenges for the teaching staff. They include organizational issues, continuing education, and conflicts in personal schedules.

Organizational issues. Teachers in multi-track YRE deal with a number of organizational challenges over and beyond that of single-track. For example, in single-track YRE, teachers retain their own classrooms. In multi-track YRE, however, four different teachers might be required to share three classrooms throughout the year. Many teachers are required to pack up their materials and move out of their classrooms for the three-week break and into a different room on their return. In this scenario, rolling carts, storage space, and custodial assistance must be available on moving days (Worthen & Zsiray, 1994). Teachers in multi-track schools are nearly unanimous in their concern about moving, and lost materials have been a concern for some teachers (Quinlan, George, & Emmett, 1987). Those teachers who move to classrooms vacated by those on inter-session break are called "roving" teachers. They may be awarded certain perks in exchange for doing this, such as no playground duty (Rasmussen, 2000). Roving teachers, however, often report feelings of alienation from the rest of the school.

Another issue of concern for teachers in multi-track YRE schools is involvement in extracurricular activities. Teachers who coach or lead an extracurricular activity may find that the activity continues while they are on break. Teachers may be able to share the leadership of the activity with another teacher or rearrange their schedules. Or, they may find they have to sacrifice some of their vacation time (Shields & Oberg, 2000).

Continuing education. Another perceived challenge of year-round education is that many teachers may have a difficult time scheduling professional development. The professional development courses needed for teachers to acquire additional licensure or certifications are often offered during the summer when year-round schools may still be in session (Minnesota, 1999). Further-

more, attending district-wide staff development during the school year is also a potential challenge when an individual school is on an alternative calendar and the rest of the district is not (Minnesota, 1999). YRE requires flexibility and cooperation in scheduling in-service training by the district and post-graduate courses by the universities (Zykowski, 1991).

Conflicts in Personal Scheduling. Unfortunately, the implementation of the year-round calendar may create personal scheduling problems for some teachers (Minnesota, 1999). A teacher's children might attend a school on a different calendar than the teacher. In those cases, the teacher will need to pay for childcare during times when the children are on break but the teacher is not. Additionally, the teacher may be unable to schedule concurrent family vacation time (Curry, et al., 1997). Teachers with non-educational summer jobs might object to the year-round schedule if they have non-education summer employment opportunities that generate significant income (Minnesota, 1999).

Although the majority of teachers report less stress and burnout in year-round schools, a few teachers report stress as a drawback to the year-round calendar. These teachers are generally extended contract teachers who do not take the same break periods as their students. Also, a few teachers report the frequent stopping and starting of instructional sessions to be disruptive (Quinlan, George, & Emmett, 1987). However, no matter which schedule schools adopt, the biggest resistance to year-round schools comes from the fear of change, say the experts (Rasmussen, 2000). Teachers, as many others, may simply resist lifestyle changes until they have had experience with the new situation and have had time to adapt.

Conclusion

The number of year-round schools in the United States has increased significantly in the past decade. In general, the more experience teachers have with year-round education, they more they like it (Minnesota, 1999). However, the process of changing from a traditional nine-month calendar to a year-round calendar can create stress for teachers until they have had time to adapt.

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